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Leggett's proposed county budget for fiscal 2011 likely to include ambulance fees

County News | Erin Cunningham

Montgomery County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park said Monday that she expects County Executive Isiah Leggett's (D) proposed fiscal 2011 budget to include revenue from ambulance fees.

However, she said she could not predict how the council would vote on that issue.

Leggett first proposed ambulance fees in 2007, but the council has never approved the fees.

County spokesman Patrick Lacefield said the fees would be collected from insurance companies as a reimbursement for ambulance transport. No money would be collected from county residents, he said.

"If you don't have insurance, you pay nothing," Lacefield said. "If you do, then the insurance company is billed."

He said the fees would generate as much as \$15 million in revenue each year, and if the council had approved the fees when they were first proposed, the county could have taken in \$45 million.

"There's money here on the table that we've walked away from the past several years for no good reason," Lacefield said.

He said the most recent budget projections — which show a shortfall of \$762 million in fiscal 2011 — only make a stronger case for ambulance fees.

Along came a spider

A spider helped illustrate Tuesday just how bad Montgomery County's budget situation is.

During a briefing on the fiscal 2011 budget, a spider crawled out of Chief Administrative Officer Timothy Firestine's budget documents.

"It comes with webs," said Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda.

As the spider crawled toward Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park she struck it with her cell phone.

"Not the iPhone," a council member said.

Cable fund eyed

for surplus revenue

With Montgomery County facing a \$762 million budget shortfall in fiscal 2011, officials are looking everywhere for additional revenue.

Many have been focusing on the county's Cable Fund, which has about \$1.4 million in surplus revenue.

The cable fund includes franchise and other fees paid to the county by cable and telecommunication companies.

On Feb. 9, the council voted to move \$415,000 from the fund to help pay for Ride On services through June 30.

The county's cable services and the fund also were discussed during the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee meeting Monday.

The county's Public Education Government cable programming includes Access Montgomery, Montgomery College Television, Montgomery County Public Schools Instructional T.V., University of Maryland College Park, University of Maryland University College, County Cable Montgomery, Montgomery Municipal Cable, and Rockville and Takoma Park government channels.

In a memo to the council, the council's information technology adviser Costis Toregas recommended that the county's cable operations be consolidated. He said it was possible for those channels to consolidate their efforts.

Council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said that could save taxpayers a lot of money.

Ervin, a member of the committee that discussed the fund, said the council would need to make tough decisions on the county's fiscal 2011 budget and challenged those who oversee the county's cable operations to consider how they could make their programming more useful and widely viewed.

"If you were to shut down ... would anyone miss your programs," Ervin asked.

Floreen seeks nominations

for Golden Shovel Awards

Montgomery County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park is seeking nominations for the 2010 Golden Shovel Awards, which will recognize residents who helped others during this season's winter storms.

Floreen began the awards program in 2003, but it has not been held for the past two years due to a lack of snow, Floreen said.

Nominations are due March 26. Nomination forms are available on the Montgomery County Council Web site or can be mailed to Golden Shovel Nominee, Montgomery County Council Award, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville, MD 20850. Nominations also can be e-mailed to Floreen at councilmember.floreen@montgomerycountymd.gov.

Ervin questions

education spending

Montgomery County government employee unions and the county's education unions are aware of the county's budget trouble, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) said Tuesday.

He said the county's fiscal 2011 budget shortfall had grown to \$762 million and that he has presented a realistic picture to unions, which are in contract negotiations with the county.

However, council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring questioned how well the county's teacher's union is getting the message, referring to the Montgomery County school board's approval of a \$2.26 billion budget for fiscal 2011 — \$37.2 million more than Superintendent Jerry D. Weast's original budget proposal in December.

County Council members said Tuesday it is assumed that some of that increase would go toward pay raises for teachers.

"How serious are they being?" Ervin asked.